

STATEMENT OF VICTOR KNOX, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES, AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING S. 403, TO REVISE THE AUTHORIZED ROUTE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL IN NORTHEASTERN MINNESOTA AND TO EXTEND THE TRAIL INTO VERMONT TO CONNECT WITH THE APPALACHIAN NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

June 10, 2015

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 403, to revise the authorized route of the North Country National Scenic Trail in northeastern Minnesota and to extend the trail into Vermont to connect with the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, and for other purposes.

The Department supports enactment of S. 403. This legislation would make two critically important improvements to the North Country National Scenic Trail: it would reroute a portion of the trail in Minnesota around dense swampland, and it would link this trail to the Appalachian Trail.

S. 403 would amend section 5(a)(8) of the National Trails System Act to revise the route of the trail in northeastern Minnesota and extend the trail beyond its current terminus in New York eastward into Vermont, increasing the total length of the trail from approximately 4,000 miles to approximately 4,600 miles. We note that although the legislated length of the trail is 3,200 miles, this figure was based upon estimates at the time of the passage of the bill that authorized the trail, and more accurate mapping has since shown the actual mileage to be closer to 4,000 miles.

The North Country National Scenic Trail was authorized by Congress in 1980 to provide superlative outdoor recreation opportunities and conservation of nationally significant scenic, historic, natural and cultural qualities along the trail corridor, to provide a premier trail experience, and to encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development, maintenance and management of the trail. The trail, which is one of six designated National Scenic Trails administered by the National Park Service, spans much of the northern United States, stretching from North Dakota to New York.

The current authorized route of the trail in northeastern Minnesota traverses approximately 93 miles of black spruce and tamarack swamp, extending westward from Jay Cooke State Park south of Duluth, to the Chippewa National Forest southwest of Grand Rapids. Because of the location and difficult environmental conditions within the swamp, no portion of this section of the trail has been constructed. Approximately seventy percent of the proposed revision — referred to as the Arrowhead Reroute — consists of three existing hiking trails: the Superior Hiking Trail, the Border Route Trail, and the Kekekabic Trail. These trails, which total approximately 400 miles, follow the north shore of Lake Superior and traverse the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in the Superior National Forest. The remaining portion of the Arrowhead Reroute — approximately 173 miles — would be new trail located over a combination of public and private lands. The net total

increase in the Minnesota portion of the North Country National Scenic Trail would be approximately 480 miles.

Since 1987, Minnesota hiking groups have repeatedly asked the NPS to study the revised route. In response to these requests, the NPS conducted the *Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment* between 1999 and 2004. In 2003 and 2004, the National Park Service held public meetings in Duluth, Ely, Grand Rapids, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Public comments reflected broad overall support for the Arrowhead Reroute, and strong support among the affected public agencies and jurisdictions. The plan and environmental assessment were approved by the NPS on September 30, 2004.

The extension of the trail route into Vermont would add approximately 66 miles to the North Country National Scenic Trail, 40 of which are already existing trails. The addition would extend from the trail's current terminus near Crown Point, New York, east to a point to be determined along the Long Trail – a National Recreation Trail in Vermont. The Long Trail then connects to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail at Maine Junction just east of Rutland, Vermont.

In the fall of 2009, the National Park Service began a study of the potential extension of the North Country National Scenic Trail in Vermont. In February 2010, three public meetings were held to announce the study and present conceptual corridors. Additional meetings were held with key stakeholders in October 2011. A public meeting to review the draft report was held on May 21, 2012. Public comments, and written and electronic responses, reflected broad overall support. *The Feasibility Study Corridor Plan and Environmental Assessment for Addison County, Vermont*, was approved by the NPS on December 16, 2013.

The NPS anticipates the cost of constructing and maintaining the Arrowhead reroute and the Vermont extension of the North Country National Scenic Trail would be manageable because the work would be done primarily by volunteers using hand tools, and current NPS staff would provide route planning and support for the volunteers who would help develop and maintain the path.

As an example, the North Country Trail Association and partners have committed to developing the connecting trail segments that will be needed between the end of the Kekekabic Trail and the Chippewa National Forest in Minnesota. Funding would be needed to supply trail markers, signage, tools, equipment, and materials. Recent average expenditures for volunteer supplies have cost the North Country National Scenic Trail approximately \$60,000 per year. The net increase of approximately 546 miles to the current trail would increase operational costs by approximately \$7,000, split between NPS support and that independently generated by the trail chapters and affiliates. The NPS portions could be accommodated within the trail's current budget.

The portions of the North Country National Scenic Trail that have yet to be built have not been laid out in detail. Rather, the studies identified respective corridors several miles wide within which the trail would eventually be laid out. The flexibility provided by these corridors would allow the NPS and its partners to design routes that will minimize the amount of private land involved.

Public Law 111-11, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, provides authority for Federal agencies to acquire lands or interests in lands from willing sellers for the North Country National Scenic Trail. As a National Scenic Trail based upon strong public-private partnerships and engaged volunteers, there is an opportunity to implement the proposed re-route and extension thorough a variety of actions and expenditures. Options for allowing access range from outright donation, to easements and access agreements facilitated by partner organizations, to fee simple acquisition from willing sellers. However, it is the intention of the NPS to pursue donations, easements, and agreements to ensure access whenever possible. Consequently, the NPS is unable to estimate land acquisition costs. However, efforts would be made to keep Federal expenditures to a minimum.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be glad to answer any questions that you or other members of the subcommittee may have.